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ABSTRACT

The Education Improvement Project (EIP) of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools serves as the assisting organization for two programs designed to improve educational practice for the marginal college freshmen - who is often a member of a minority or poverty group. The two programs are the College Education Achievement Project (CEAP), which focuses primarily on improving educational practice for marginal college freshmen in developing Black institutions, and the Higher Education Achievement Program (HEAP), which focuses on improving educational practice in developing institutions for marginal students from minority or poverty groups. This paper briefly discusses the development and use of a heuristic model for the development of symbolic competence in marginal college freshmen. The model (1) asks: what is the relationship between symbolic competence and social learning; (2) is based on the hypothesis that social learning fosters self-actualization which facilitates the development of symbolic competence; and (3) lists a series of consequences to be tested. (AF)

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IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE FOR MARGINAL COLLEGE FRESHMEN

A Research Model
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Due to a number of conditions, more or less beyond their control and the control of their mentors, many high school graduates from minority/poverty groups may be classified as marginal college freshmen. These young people may either be regarded as potential social dynamite or as potential productive citizens. Whether they will be social dynamite or productive citizens may depend on finding and using modes of educational practice appropriate to their needs.

What these youngsters need are identifiable routes that they can use to reach economic, political, and social goals. This increasingly technological society could use the competence which these young people have the capacity to develop. It can ill afford the economic, political, and social burdens that would be imposed if they are not prepared to be productive and constructive persons.

Goals of CEAP and HEAP

The Education Improvement Project (EIP) of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools will serve as the assisting organization for two programs designed to improve educational practice for this population. The College Education Achievement Project (CEAP), begun in 1967, focuses primarily on improving educational practice for marginal college freshmen in developing

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black institutions. The Higher Education Achievement Program (HEAP), to begin in 1971, focuses on improving educational practice in developing institutions for marginal students from minority/ poverty groups. Both programs are designed to be delivered through consortia with funding under Title III of the Higher Education Act.

Through the CEAP and the HEAP, the EIP purports to work toward bringing about three kinds of change expected to influence educational practice and opportunity for marginal students in the region. For the marginal college freshmen, the EIP aims to provide learning experiences that equip them to make use of programs at developing institutions to reach their educational and vocational goals. For the developing institutions, EIP purports to provide demonstrations that they can be successful with students whose entry characteristics vary from the traditional ones and without lowering the quality of their graduates. And, for educational theory and practice, the EIP will work to show that educational conceptions with assumptions different from those of conventional wisdom can be employed as bases for developing new modes of practice appropriate to the needs of marginal college freshmen.

Heuristic Approach to Research and Development

One basic problem of marginal college freshmen, in the context of higher education as conventionally conceived and operated, seems to be that of symbolic competence or the ability to use symbols (Bowers and Hollister, 1967). However, the ability to use symbols to represent experiential or existential phenomena

is not unrelated to the life styles developed by students from poverty/minority groups as means of functioning in a sociocultural heritage hostile to their self-actualization (Kardiner and Ovesey, 1951; Maslow, 1968). This assumption has led to the specification of an heuristic model that may be used to guide research and development. The results could lead to an order of conceptions and modes of practice more appropriate for the educational needs of the disadvantaged than what is current. The model follows:

DEVELOPMENT OF SYMBOLIC COMPETENCE IN MARGINAL COLLEGE FRESHMEN

1. Problem: What is the relationship between symbolic competence and social learning?

2. Hypothesis: Social learning fosters self-actualization which facilitates the development of symbolic competence.

3. Consequences to be tested: If the above hypothesis is true, then the following consequences are observable and can be tested directly or indirectly:

   a. Changes in those characteristics of marginal college freshmen indicative of the level and quality of self-actualizing behaviors are associated with changes in their levels of symbolic competence.

   b. Changes in students' level of symbolic competence vary with the extent to which significant others in the educational environment employ facilitative helping relationships in their encounters with students and with each other.

   c. Students in those centers where significant others in the educational environment vary their exercise of influence in ways that conform with the interaction model reflect higher levels of self-actualizing behaviors and of symbolic competence than students in those centers where the exercise of influence fails to conform to the interaction model.

   d. Students in those centers where instructional methods and materials are designed to satisfy learning needs resulting from their problems of living as members of minority/poverty groups will show greater achieve-

ment than students in those centers where such methods and materials are not employed.

4. Test of consequences: Students in experimental and control centers will be tested in the Fall and retested in the Spring. Between test and retest, students and/or staff in experimental centers will be treated as prescribed while students and staff in control centers will be treated as usual.

5. Results of test of consequences: Appropriate statistical procedures will be employed to test the significance of differences in frequencies, means, and variances. Factor analytic techniques may also be used to ascertain the structures of selected domains.

6. Conclusion: Confirmation or disconformation of hypothesis.

Use of the Model

During the academic year 1971-72, fifteen centers in as many developing institutions are expected to be operating in the CEAP and HEAP consortia. A more or less systematic framework of ideas will be needed as a basis for planning and executing evaluative studies of various aspects of those programs. The model is one of several formulated to serve this function.

Any effort to test all of the listed consequences in one undertaking would probably prove too massive for the usual investigation. Such an effort would not only face knotty problems in not only statistical design and analysis and of instrumentation, but also massive problems of staffing and funding. However, individual staff members or teams of individual staff members can get suggestions from the model for use in planning and carrying out studies in their centers. Eventually, the results of such studies may converge and provide the basis for more experience-based statements in this domain.

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